

**Erich Fromm and North Korea:
A Talk with Students at the Yonsei University
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Abstract: This talk was delivered to students in Sociology IEE3131: Politics and Society of North Korea at the Yonsei University International Summer School, Yonsei University, Seoul, South Korea, on July 1, 2010. The subject is the social psychology of the national-Stalinist North Korean state-regime from the perspective of Erich Fromm's sociological revision of psychoanalysis. Totalitarianism, patricentricism, group narcissism, ideology, and the revolutionary façade are addressed. A revised and expanded version of the talk is published as the paper "Erich Fromm and North Korea: Social Psychology and the Political Regime" in *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 40.4 (2014): 575–600.

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1. Introduction

Good afternoon, everyone.

Today, I am going to discuss the ideas of an individual with whom some of you might be familiar. He is the German American sociologist and social psychologist Erich Fromm, who was born in 1900 and died in 1980.

This being a class on North Korean politics and society, I am sure some of you are asking yourselves, "What does Erich Fromm have to do with North Korea?"

The argument I will present to you this afternoon is that Fromm has quite a

lot to do with the subject of North Korea, that his ideas offer a framework towards understanding the social and psychological character of the regime and the people.

Fromm, of course, made no special study of North Korean society. He was, however, fully aware of the strategic significance of the Korean peninsula in United States and Soviet foreign policy.

But that is not a case for the relevance of Fromm to North Korea.

If Fromm did not make a study of North Korea, how are his social psychological ideas related to the country? The answer is to be found in his study of totalitarianism and in his study of social character.

Before going into these subjects, it is necessary to provide some brief background information on Fromm and his method.

2. Critical Theory

Erich Fromm was an important early member of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, an institution better known as the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, which was founded by leading German Jewish intellectuals in 1923.

Fromm, in his affiliation with the Frankfurt School, comes out of the tradition of what is known as neo-Marxism, a school of academic thought that attempted to revise the historical materialism of Karl Marx with the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Georg Lukács, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, and other thinkers.

Fromm was the only major Frankfurt School member who was both trained in sociology and a practicing clinical psychoanalyst.

Unlike his colleagues, Fromm considered the sex-rooted and instinct-based individual psychology of Freud to be highly problematic. He thus sought to sociologize Freudianism and translate its psychoanalytic theories into the language of society and culture.

That project met with strong resistance from other Frankfurt School members, such as Theodor Adorno and later Herbert Marcuse, who were not trained in sociology or psychoanalysis, but wanted to preserve Freud's sex-based libido theory.

Although Fromm was associated with the Institute for Social Research since 1928, the differences with his colleagues were too great. He ended his tenure at the school in 1939, which by then had relocated to the United States following the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi government in 1933 (see McLaughlin, 1999).

As to Fromm's method, although he was not a Marxist, he was influenced by Marx's materialist conception of history, which saw social history as a law-governed process with a material basis in the economic relations of society, which condition an entire superstructure of ideas, beliefs, and social practices.

Because Fromm was a social psychologist, he was interested in the mediating function of psychology in the basis and superstructure relationship.

Without completely ignoring the leading role of economic forces, he focused on such things as social structure, social character, and the socially repressed part of human experience, the social unconscious.

That brings us to the subject of North Korea.

3. Totalitarianism and Patricentricism

North Korea today is an eroding totalitarian system (Scobell, 2008: 12–13) decisively modeled on the Stalinist and Maoist systems of totalitarianism.

Fromm maintained that totalitarian states like the Stalinist Soviet Union and Maoist China were bureaucratic mass-managed societies that had nothing to do with socialism. In his analysis, the Stalinist states were systems of alienation ruled by a managerial-political-military bureaucracy (Fromm, 1961: 54–55, 81–82). These were not systems democratically ruled by the people.

Although Fromm recognized that the means of production were socialized in

the Soviet Union and China, he nevertheless argued that these were fundamentally capitalist states and that the bureaucratic elite constituted a capitalist class who controlled the means of production. Despite the dubiousness of that proposition, it is evident that Fromm's ideas of alienation and bureaucracy apply to North Korea.

If the totalitarian society is an alienated and bureaucratic one, how, one may ask, does it control people on a mass scale? Fromm (1961: 26–29; 1990: 60–63; 1994: 183–204) explained that this was done through the manipulation of ideology, feelings of insecurity, and “suggested” forms of automaton-thinking.

In the case of countries that came out of the colonial revolution, such as North Korea, the manipulation of ideology was combined with anticolonial and anti-imperialist nationalism. Since North Korea is a postcolonial society with a traumatic history under Japanese colonial-fascist rule (1910–1945), not to mention U.S. invasion in the Korean War (1950–1953), the social character of the society is more easily prone to nationalism.

According to Fromm, nationalism was originally a progressive movement that overcame feudal absolutism. Modern nationalism, however, is an incestuous and insane idolatry whose cult is patriotism, and in the totalitarian states, nationalism is a pathological type of extreme “state and clan worship” (Fromm, 1990: 57, 58).

North Korean ideology and nationalism, exemplified in the *Juche* (self-reliance) and *Songun* (military-first) ideologies, exhibit this pathological nationalism in the idea that the society is a family, the leader is the father, the party is the mother, and the people are filial sons and daughters.

Relevant to North Korean state and clan worship are two social psychological principles Fromm called the *patricentric complex* and the *matricentric complex*.

Patricentric individuals and societies are marked by several pronounced traits. These are (1) a strict superego, (2) guilt feelings, (3) docile love for paternal authority, (4) desire and pleasure in dominating weaker people, (5) acceptance of

suffering as punishment for guilt, and (6) a damaged capacity for happiness. Matricentric societies exhibit opposite traits (Fromm, 1970: 104).

North Korea is a highly gendered and male-dominated society centered on the image and authority of the father. Consequently, it is a patricentric society. But North Korea cannot function on the patricentric principle alone. Thus, the state and ideology exploit the *matricentric complex*.

That is achieved by using mother substitutes, such as the notions of the motherland (*ŏmŏni choguk*), the mother party (*ŏmŏni tang*), the mother general (*ŏmŏni changgunnim*), the mother of revolution (*hyŏngmyŏng ŭi ŏmŏni*), the mother of Mount Paekdu (*paekdusan ŭi ŏmŏni*), the mother of Korea (*Chosŏn ŭi ŏmŏni*), and so on.

The purpose of using mother substitutes is to create emotional attachment to the state and to justify the bureaucratic and male-dominated party-military regime.

In so doing, the state ideology promotes what Fromm calls *incestuous fixation* with the mother, a pathology that involves both irrational dependence on mother and fear of mother, who represents the unequal, patricentric social order.

Kim Ch'ŏl's 1981 poem "Mother" (Őmŏni; 1989: 32–36), which glorifies the ruling party and depicts the people as helpless children, is one clear example of how the North Korean state-regime resorts to the method of *incestuous fixation*.

4. Group Narcissism

Connected to North Korean nationalism, the *patricentric complex*, and *incestuous fixation* is Fromm's concept of group narcissism.

North Korean group narcissism does not see humanity as one race. Rather, it promotes a belief in the national superiority of the ethnic group, as in the nation-first policy (*minjok cheiljuŭi*), along with sacred symbols and emotionally charged images that embody group narcissism. "Our nation is the best in the world" goes one North Korean slogan in official English translation (Korean News Service,

2003).¹

The narcissistic pathology is not something that emerges from psychology alone. The pathology has a basis in social, economic, and political conditions.

Narcissism is a real force in North Korea and a real power, and it is something the national-Stalinist regime needs in order to secure the position of the ruling bureaucratic caste and to preserve its social interests.

The social and political expression of group narcissism in North Korea creates a situation in which the world outside the country does not exist in the normal sense. The group is the world. The group is the center of the world. This group solipsism, in Fromm's terms, or "national solipsism," to use Bruce Cumings' phrase, is a distortion of reality that operates as a defensive and survival mechanism.

Sociologically, the regime invests the nation with its narcissistic self-image. Survival of the regime would not be possible unless the national community comes to acknowledge the importance or greatness of the ruling group and make sacrifices for it.

Fromm distinguishes two types of narcissism: benign narcissism and malignant narcissism. The first results from effort, work, and achievement. The second results from what has been inherited. That can include biological, cultural, and historical inheritances.

Malignant narcissism on the group level is pronounced in North Korea and notably so from the point its aid-dependent economy began experiencing economic difficulties in the 1960s, following reduction of Soviet and Chinese assistance as a result of the Sino-Soviet split (1961–1963).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Eastern European satellite states, and the COMECON trading bloc in 1991, the combination of economic crisis, famine, and international sanctions has given the North Korean regime even more need to rely on pathological group narcissism. If I may quote Fromm (1980: 78–79),

he says:

A society which lacks the means to provide adequately for the majority of its members, or a large portion of them, must provide these members with a narcissistic satisfaction of the malignant type if it wants to prevent dissatisfaction among them. For those who are economically and culturally poor, narcissistic pride in belonging to the group is the only—and often a very effective—source of satisfaction. Precisely because life is not “interesting” to them [the people], and does not offer them possibilities for developing interests, they develop an extreme form of narcissism.

This is a very instructive passage because it helps direct one’s attention to the material, economic basis of several interrelated cults in North Korea: the cult of racial homogeneity (*tanil minjok*), the cult of blood and soul (*p’i wa nokt*), the cult of nation and destiny (*minjok kwa unmyŏng*), and the cult of Tangun, the mythical founder of the Korean nation.

Of course, these things are not new in North Korea. They are ethnic-nationalist conceptions with antecedents in the colonial era and in the 1940s, since the Soviet military occupation in 1945 and the founding of the North Korean state in 1948.

The difference is that group narcissism in North Korea assumed more intense and overt forms in the post-Soviet 1990s.

Previously, idolization of blood and race was packaged in the pseudo-class and pseudo-internationalist language of Stalinist Marxism-Leninism. Today, Marxism-Leninism and Communism are useless ideologies for the beleaguered North Korean regime, which dropped both terms from its 1992 and 2009 revised constitutions.

Because North Korea is economically impoverished and cannot provide for

its population without world humanitarian aid, and because the bureaucracy fears the masses, group narcissism serves the important sociological function to contain the people with feelings of cultural, historical, and racial pride and love of country. Group narcissism flatters personal narcissism.

Nationalism, the *patricentric complex*, and the pathology of group narcissism in North Korea are not simply academic matters. They have a very real and significant bearing on North Korean domestic and foreign policy and affect how the regime acts in the U.S.-dominated international environment, which North Korea perceives as hostile to its existence.

One must also acknowledge that U.S. economic sanctions and containment policies against North Korea encourage and exacerbate the nationalistic, patricentric, and narcissistic tendencies in the country.

5. Ideology

Fromm (1985: 65) explains that the basic purpose of psychoanalysis is to understand the dynamic psychological forces that motivate human behavior and, on the basis of that understanding, predict human behavior.

Where the behavior of state-regimes is concerned, making sense of official ideology is necessary. But ideology must never be confused with reality. State-regimes must be judged not by what they say about themselves in ideological propaganda, but by how they act (Fromm, 1961: 130, 137).

From the standpoint of Fromm's social psychology, one would be committing a great methodological error to presume "how North Koreans see themselves" simply by studying propaganda.

Such an approach overlooks, if not willfully ignores, the more important roles of the economic structure, social-political structure, and character structure of society.

While propaganda in a totalitarian system, even in an eroding totalitarian

system, reflects material life conditions and the economic basis of society, ideological propaganda is a distortion of social reality to manipulate people for the survival interests of the ruling group.

There are indications in North Korean domestic-foreign policy behavior and in defector testimony that the ruling bureaucracy does not actually believe its own ideology, but is driven more by pragmatic self-interest and *realpolitik*.

As for regular North Koreans, one can generalize that rather than believing in the state ideology, they are constrained by social organization, social rules and social traditions, sociopolitical rituals, and by the psychological complexes the regime has generated in them through decades of cultural isolation, indoctrination, and information control.

Needless to say, psychological shifts are occurring in the country with the rise of markets and other private and illegal entrepreneurial activities.

Of course, there is still likely a small minority of North Koreans who are true fanatic believers in the ideology.

6. Revolutionary Façade

North Korea is a non-socialist and non-revolutionary system that operates under the conservative Stalinist program of “socialism in one country” (*han nara sahoejuŭi*).

As the late Kim Il Sung is quoted as saying in volume three of his official biography by Baik Bong (1970: 87), “Even when the entire world has become communist society, the Koreans will continue to live in Korea.”

Fromm (1988: 187) would describe that idea as “fake socialism” and as having nothing to do with Marx. Rather, communism and socialism, terms Marx used interchangeably, stand for an international classless society where nations and nation-states have disappeared and are replaced by the free association of humanity.² Fromm (2004: 56) says:

For Marx, socialism meant the social order which permits the return of man to himself, the identity between existence and essence, the overcoming of the separateness and antagonism between subject and object, the humanization of nature; it meant a world in which man is no longer a stranger among strangers, but is in *his* world, where he is at home. (*italics in original*)

The North Korean leadership has no desire to replace nationalism with internationalism, much less see working-class socialist revolutions in South Korea or the West, events that would be highly destabilizing to the privileged bureaucracy.

Yet having justified itself for decades with Marxist-sounding phrases, the nationalist regime still has a need to maintain a revolutionary façade while pursuing authoritarian and repressive social policies.

Confirming this façade, for example, is the pamphlet edition of a January 29, 2003, speech on the *Songun* political line delivered by Kim Jong Il to senior party officials. On the title page, one finds a variation of Marx and Engels' famous programmatic call from the *Communist Manifesto*: "Working people of the whole world, unite!" Kim, however, goes on to say that the working class is not a revolutionary force and that Marxism and Marx's theories are irrelevant in the twenty-first century.

Kim (2007: 5) declares "precedence of the army over the working class" and restates himself: "Applying *Songun* politics, our Party has given prominence to the [Korean] People's Army over the working class." He adds that "regarding the working class as the main force of the revolution anytime and anywhere is an expression of a dogmatic viewpoint" and that "neither the working class nor any other social group can substitute" the KPA (Kim, 2007: 8, 9).

Kim would have one believe that a military dictatorship, something North Korea has been since the rise of the National Defense Commission in 1998, is a

revolutionary system.

In fact, a very simple rhetorical technique in official North Korean discourse is to use the adjective “revolutionary” (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk*) to give conservative state policies a radical-sounding cover. A random online search of Korean Central News Agency articles in Korean, not to mention in English, reveals several such phrases:

- revolutionary enthusiasm (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk yŏljŏng*)
- revolutionary learning ethos (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk hagsŭp kip'ung*)
- revolutionary learning method (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk hagsŭp pangbŏp*)
- revolutionary mass perspective (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk kunjung kwanjŏm*)
- revolutionary principles (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk wŏnch'ik*)
- revolutionary soldier culture (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏkin kunin munhwa*)
- revolutionary soldier spirit (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk kunin chŏngshin*)
- revolutionary upswing (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk daegojo*)
- revolutionary view of the great leader (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk suryŏng kwan*)
- revolutionary worldview (*hyŏngmyŏngjŏk segye kwan*)³

The ritualistic repetition of these propagandistic formulas, like modern advertising, casts a hypnotic spell on the mind and numbs the capacity for critical judgment (Fromm, 1994: 127 – 129). But also like modern advertising, propagandistic repetition can also create indifference and even resentment in those who are constantly subjected to it.

7. Conclusion

The social psychology of North Korea is a very complex problem, and I have, up to this point, only been able to address things in the broadest and most general terms.

My argument has been that Erich Fromm's sociological revision of psychoanalysis is a relevant and useful point of entry into North Korean sociopsychological life. Fromm's theories do not, however, provide the answers in

themselves.

One must compare and connect the theory with empirical social reality. That means a social psychology of North Korea must rely on both qualitative and quantitative methods of research.

Along with a combination of data collection and analysis, the successful application of Fromm's social psychology will require a close acquaintance with his major writings, all of which are available in Korean translation.

One will also benefit by learning more about Marx's materialist conception of history, which is foundational to Fromm's method, even though Fromm interprets historical materialism and its conclusions selectively.

I would also recommend Leon Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937; 1991) as a corrective to Fromm's misunderstanding of Stalinism as a form of capitalist society.

These are challenging issues, and a lot of work has to be done.

As South Korean students of North Korea, you have several advantages in verifying, elaborating, or disputing what I have discussed with you today. Chief among these advantages are language, history, and culture, which give you potentially greater insight than I can obtain into the social and psychological life of North Korea.

Thank you.

Acknowledgment

I thank Professor Suk Hi Kim for extending the guest-talk invitation to me and the students of Sociology IEE3131 for their questions.

Notes

1. The original Korean phrase, "uri minjok i sesang eso cheil ira," appears in Chosŏn T'ongshin, 2003.

2. “The working men have no country. [...] In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx & Engels, 2004).
3. These terms are derived from a *Google* keyword search (“혁명적” site:kcna.co.jp) on June 29, 2010. KCNA articles from 2007 to 2009 were the first to appear.

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